

GELMIS: Where Do Black Movies Go From Here

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GELMIS, Where Do Black Movies Go From Here?

By Joseph Gelmis

There has been some speculation among movie sources that the wave of the future in black films is the interracial superstar romance or adventure—a pairing, say, of Robert Redford and Diana Ross, or of Jane Fonda and Billy Dee Williams. "It's in the air," says Rob Cohen, a young (mid-20s) white business associate of Ross at Motown Pictures Productions. It could happen, Cohen says, in the next year.

Such speculation, for now, is a pipe dream. It could happen soon. But the fact is that Hollywood doesn't know what to do next to fill the gap left by the decline of the "blaxploitation" pictures. Agents, producers, writers are trying to dream up the next packaging formula.

The Black American, a weekly, estimates that 25 per cent of the U.S. moviegoing audience today is black. Cheap get-whiter or revenge movies produced on shoestring budgets by independents (mostly whites) and occasionally distributed by major companies still can earn relatively solid profits.

But the novelty has worn off a genre which began with "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" in 1971, leaving that "getting it off" style to the shockmeisters who put together a "Boss Nigger" or a "Brotherhood of Death" (get the KKK). The "Shaft" and "Superfly" black stud fantasies palled, finally, and "Shaft" bombed as a TV series. A fad that had depended on black athletes and models, rather than black actors and actresses, wore out its welcome.

Last year, there was one major studio (Paramount) exploitation picture, "Mandingo," which "crossed over." That is, its lurid, violent vision of plantation life in the South during slavery appealed equally to whites and blacks on some gut level. Audiences laughed at the absurdities and excesses on the screen, talked back to the screen, but it reached them, and word of mouth made the movie a hit even though critics loathed it. Dino De Laurentiis is readying another variation on "Mandingo" for later this year.



Perry King and Brenda Sykes in 'Mandingo.' Some movie sources think black-white romance is the wave of the future.

The "crossover" principle is the magic phrase in movie circles these days. Diana Ross is a crossover star. Since her movie debut as Billie Holiday in "Lady Sings the Blues," which had about as much to do with Holiday as "Gable and Lombard" had to do with those biographical subjects, Diana Ross has been nearly as popular with whites as with blacks. Her "Mahogany," which re-teamed her with Billy Dee Williams, was a glossy, melodramatic mess from Paramount last year, but audi-

ences couldn't get enough of the Williams-Ross chemistry. The movie reportedly grossed more than \$15 million at the box office.

The other significant black-oriented movie of 1975 (grossing more than \$20 million at the box office) was a comedy—a sequel no less (to "Uptown Saturday Night")—called "Let's Do It Again," costarring Sidney Poitier and Bill Cosby and directed by Poitier.

Black family dramas, soap operas, melodramas without distinction have

no important impact just because of their blackness, even within the black community. Even a well-acted melodrama of ghetto family life, such as "The River Niger," with James Earl Jones and Cicely Tyson, bankrolled and controlled by blacks, who also distributed it independently, can't get by on sincerity and a mediocre script.

The most serious black complaint leveled at movies is that they don't give an honest depiction of the black experience. But neither do most of the 100 or so movies produced now by official Hollywood give us a true picture of the white experience. Hollywood is no mirror; it's a dream factory, always has been. Documentaries are the least popular box-office attraction.

The basic training ground for black directors is necessarily live theater. Apprentice programs, like that at Third World Cinema, are slow to create the talent pool from which winners can arise. There are no great black filmmakers yet. Gordon Parks, a former still photographer for Life magazine, made a smooth, dull biography of folk musician Huddie Ledbetter, "Leadbelly," for Paramount and then cried conspiracy when his movie couldn't find an audience in out-of-New York trials. Ossie Davis, a good actor, made a shoddy B action picture in Nigeria, "Countdown at Kusini," with \$800,000 of black sorority Delta Sigma Theta's funds. Davis couldn't get a previous film he directed in Africa distributed in the United States.

The black capital investments in movies are not sizable enough to change the balance of control in the business. Concerned blacks, led by Emmet J. Scott, Booker T. Washington's secretary, had set the pattern of financing a film to present a suitable image of themselves as early as 60 years ago. They rebutted the racist "Birth of a Nation" with the "Birth of a Race," which historians describe as an amateurish fiasco. We learned early that the magic of movies bypassed the brain, played on feelings, had no reliance on facts, truth, morality. Even a bigot could make a

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masterpiece; a just man might have no talent.

It is ironic and inevitable that a major upcoming (July 12) "black" movie from Hollywood, "The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars & Motor Kings," should have been written, financed and directed by white men and that the movie story should end with the signing of the first black baseball player by the lily-white big leagues.

Inevitable, because in high stakes games like major league movies or baseball the integration of blacks has not gotten much further than playing ball with the white power structure—which owns the studio or stadium, franchise, contracts, lawyers, delivery system.

"Bingo Long" is a comedy about an all-black baseball team. It is set in the 1930s, so it's a nostalgia item. It is from Universal, the studio that gave us "The Sting" and "Jaws." And there's a black power-broker, Motown boss Berry Gordy, behind it. Its roster of players includes James Earl Jones, Billy Dee Williams and Richard Pryor.

At this point, Gordy and Poitier are the only two black men with any muscle in the white-run movie business. Each has done it on the basis of the strength of a performer who has crossover appeal. Poitier chooses and directs his own movies, wisely supporting himself with gifted comics like Cosby and Pryor. Gordy's leverage in Hollywood is Diana Ross. She was a star of his Motown record company. Through her, he became an executive producer on "Lady Sings the Blues" and "Mahogany." On "Mahogany," Gordy fired white director Tony Richardson ("Tom Jones") and took over directorial controls himself. Gordy was executive producer of "Bingo Long," using a new young white director, John Badham, who came from the Yale Drama School and TV work. With a white director in decline or a new one, Gordy could still be a force behind the scenes.

It is too early to guess where black films will go, but it appears that with the trend toward crossovers we may have a spate of interracial movies where romance is as likely as conflict. The main "trends" observable in black films today are romance and comedy. No surprise, really, during hard times, when audiences favor escapist entertainment. ■■